

Strike in the docks of Constanta in Romania, 2008



An account and analysis of the largely successful strike of Romanian dockers over pay and shift working in 2008.

DP World - Europe's Eastern gateway blocked:

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In Romania the strike wave continues: on Thursday morning, 17th of July 2008, five hundred dock workers at the Agigea Sud terminal went on indefinite strike. The terminal belongs to the container port of Constanta, a town at the Romanian coast of the Black Sea. Their main demands: a wage increase of 700 Ron (about 200 Euros), a bonus for seniority, extra-payment for overtime and a clear regulation of the working-time.

The author of this article was in Constanta and talked to the workers.

The first day of strike

At the main gate of the container port Constanta Agigea Sud a wind-torn leaflet announces an indefinite strike, starting at 7 am, 17th of July 2008. On the port premises no movements can be seen, the crates remain silent and unused. The company has locked out the strikers. About 150 workers on picket-line have gathered at the gate, shouting slogans: "We work, and we want to be paid for it!", "Thieves, thieves" and "We won't be slaves in our own country!". The Constanta South Terminal is run by DP World, well equipped with modern facilities, 85 percent of the total container turn-over of Romania's biggest port happens here. According to their own figures last year the company made twelve Million Euros profit.

Five years ago the terminal ran its first shift. When hired people were promised that the work would be done according to European standards and that soon (western-)European wages will be paid. To this day the latter had not happened. The port workers earn an equivalent to about 400 Euros per month. There was an increase: an increase in work pressure, in numbers of containers, which had to be shipped or unloaded per shift and an increase in over-time, which is still paid without any bonus payments.

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The demand of 700 Ron is not that high if you take the current inflation in Romania into account. The price for (cooking and heating) gas has hiked by 20 percent since the beginning

of June 2008. The food prices are comparable to those discounter supermarket like Aldi and Lidl in Western Europe . Many dockers had to take out loans in order to buy a car or a flat.1

The inflation means it becomes increasingly difficult to pay the installments demanded.

It is not only the wage issue which triggers the dock workers' anger. One of their most important demands is the adherence to the standard working-time. The terminal runs on a 12/24-hours shift-scheme, which means that a single shift is twelve hours long, after that the worker has got a 24-hours break. After each fourth shift there is a break of 48 hours. The workers have to switch constantly between day- and night-shift. The management does not stick to this scheme, workers are often called to work on their day off; they are supposed to start work within an hour. They have to be available on their mobile phones at all times. If they do not answer the phone the management puts it as 'unmotivated attitude', meaning that in the 'cartea de munca', the employee's record book, the remark

'absent without valid excuse'

will be entered. 2 After three of these 'unauthorized absences' you get the sack. The striking workers tell that due to being permanently 'on call' they are not able to make plans for their free time with their families. Or as a docker puts it straight: "The work fucks you up and you are not even paid properly for it".

There is a cheerful and lively atmosphere at the picket-line. The sun blasts down, there is no shade in front of the head office. In an hourly routine the strikers gather in order to shout their slogans and make some noise with horns and whistles. "The strike won't go on for too long, they have to fulfill our demands. We blockade the freight traffic of the whole country, even of some of the neighboring countries. The big industrial areas depend on us!", states an older dock worker.

Suddenly an enormous chorus of car horns can be heard. On the other side of the terminal hundreds of lorries have queued up, waiting for their load. The strike has a heavy impact on the truck drivers, they are paid by kilometers, not by the hour. But most of them see the strike as a justifiable act, even though they have to return empty for today.

The strike is union lead. In the terminal two small unions are registered; both are affiliated to the FNSP - the National Trade Union Congress for Dock Workers. During conversations with the dockers it becomes clear that it was not the unions who had called for a strike, but that the workers had put pressure on them. "Last year they negotiated and signed a contract without asking us, and the contract was shit. They are in process of negotiating for five months now, but this time we are watching them closely!" - "To walk out is the only way to enforce our demands."

For the following day at 3 p.m. the management of WP World has staged a new round of negotiations. There are lively debates amongst the workers, because the negotiations are supposed to take place in Hotel Ibis, which is in twelve kilometer distance from the picket-line. One of the strikers thinks that it was wrong to have given in to the managements'

proposal for the venue. "We are hundreds of strikers here, they should come here and negotiate with us. They have the space here to do that. Not behind our backs at some far away location".

At 7 p.m. the night-shift takes over the picket-line. According to the workers the company wouldn't find any scabs anyway, because the qualified workers have all gone abroad.

The second day of strike

Five big container ships lie off the terminal, waiting for the dispute to be solved. DP World tries to send some of the cargo work to be done by the ports in Odessa , Ukraine .

In the national television news there is hardly any information about the strike. Only a local channel broadcast some news. But one of the dockers said convincingly: "It doesn't really

bother us, if they do not report about us anyway. What is important is that here everything keeps being at stand-still. In the end the country will take notice of the blockade."

It's late afternoon. On the square in front of the main office 150 strikers have gathered again.

Their faces display tense emotions.

The talks have failed. The management pretended to be unmoved and did not change their initial offer even one tiny bit. They even threatened to withdraw their current offer of about 100 Euros wage increase. A union leader and member of the negotiation table - he himself a dock worker in the port - reports in details to his fellow workers: "At some point the management all left the table saying 'Right, we will meet again in front of the court. We will check whether the strike is legal at all. That's it for us now, we do not want to waste our time.'

They said that they have made plans for the weekend, that they will take a trip to the delta of river Danube , go fishing." Many questions come up and long discussions start amongst the striking workers: what would be the result of a legal suspension of the strike, would the union pay strike money if the struggle carries on for a longer period of time? There isn't much hesitation about the main question: The strike will be continued. We do not give in! "Do you know what, guys, on Monday we will turn up and change our demands, as well. We will keep up the demand of a 700 hike, but not 700 Ron, we talk about 700 Euros!"

While hundred thousands of holiday-makers lay around choc-a-bloc sunbathing on the beach of the Black Sea , only few kilometers away the strikers prepare for a longer struggle. The union head-organization FNSP has announced a solidarity strike in the entire port of Constanta for Monday.³

The cranes are still silent. The lorries have returned. The ships are waiting.

DP World Constanta South Container Terminal: The strike has ended

[02. August 2008] After thirteen days of the strike at the DP WORLD Container-Terminal in the port of Constanta, the union and management reached an agreement on July 29th. The workers at the port have been able to wrench some concessions from management: a wage rise amounting to 650 Ron (180 Euros) overall, to be awarded in two stages (see box), one more day of holiday, a 30 percent increase in Easter and Christmas bonuses and the promise to respect statutory work and rest periods. But management is not willing to grant the seniority bonus which is a mandatory part of the labor law. This issue is due to be inspected by the regulatory agency for labor issues (inspectia munici).

Although not all the strikers' demands were met, the majority decided to accept the offer and end the strike. Yet some workers are unhappy.

"If we had continued the strike for one or two more days they would have faltered and eventually given in to all our demands. But what can you do, there were only about fifty of us willing to continue. The others got scared or maybe did not believe any more that we could win", said one of the strikers, a truck driver, after the decision to take up work again. He is pissed off: "We could have got more. But in the last few days we were lacking cohesion. Too many were satisfied with the result."

Last Saturday there was another 7-hour round of negotiations. Management adjusted its offer three times. The bargaining committee (mostly workers from the terminal) and the strikers who had come along refused three times. The port workers initially agreed to a wage rise in two stages (the first from July 1st 2008, the second from January 1st 2009, shortly after which a new round of negotiations would start). But many thought this was a trick by management, intended to delay long-term wage rises. There were heated discussions amongst the strikers and disappointment at the fact that several of their fellow workers did not show up even though they had all been informed of the ongoing

negotiations. No agreement was

reached on that Saturday. In its last offer that day, management reduced the previously proposed wage rise by 50 Ron, offering monthly gift vouchers over a value of 100 Ron instead. These do not have the same status as a wage rise, and this strategic move newly angered the strikers. They decided to continue striking.

A strike against the transition to flexible working hours Despite the concessions, one important point remains open: work stress and the availability of port workers at all times. The strikers had repeatedly told us that they receive calls on their mobile phones in their free time telling them to get to work within the hour. Conversely, if there is not enough work their shifts are canceled on short notice and they do not get paid for the lost shift. Accordingly, they had demanded adherence to the statutory rest periods of 24

and/or 48 hours, as well as 100 percent extra pay on short-notice shifts – which the workers would be free to take or leave. Additionally, the company would have to pay 75 percent of the full pay in case of a lost shift.

With this demand the strikers were ultimately not able to prevail. It was only noted down that the shift system of 12/24 and 12/48 (i.e. twelve hours work, 24 hours break, 12 hours work, 48 hours break) must be adhered to. Also, a list is currently being compiled of all the workers generally willing to work overtime, thus making themselves available to the company at all times. Refusing overtime will apparently not be penalized. Extra pay for overtime was not arranged. And shift cancellations during low periods will still not be paid.

Gruelling day-to-day life on strike

Management's strategy of (officially) ignoring the strike and thereby bullying the strikers was partly successful. The workers' insecurity increased with every day of the strike. They did not know whether they would achieve anything by stopping work. And the media was hardly reporting the strike. The strikers felt isolated. Day-to-day life on strike consisted mainly of a grueling wait. Some bloggers attacked the strikers on the web because of their comparatively high wages. Numerous truck drivers who work for shippers across the country lost almost two weeks' pay because of the strike, as the goods they were supposed to drive had been blocked at the port for so long. There were fights in the strikers'

families because of the pay lost through the strike.

But the strikers were aware that they were working in a modern and highly productive part of the port which they keep running day and night, 365 days a year. Container transport at the port of Constanta is booming. The volume of container traffic has increased more than tenfold between 2001 and 2007, which is mostly due to the completed DP World terminal, where 85 percent of all the containers are handled or unloaded. The goods blocked there through strike action remained blocked. It was impossible to use scabs, because there are not enough qualified workers in the region.

"We could have got more"

The strikers showed their teeth and were able to win some of their demands. But the concessions they won mainly relate to wage rises. They only got a vague assurance regarding availability around the clock and adherence to the statutory work times. They have not been able to change anything about the stress at work, the pressure which they are subject to because of the intensity of the work, the few breaks (only 30 minutes break in a 12 hour shift), and the increased risk of accident because of exhaustion.

Or, as a port worker pointedly put it during the strike: "What use is a higher wage if I do the work of two men and then die in an accident?"

Wage development

The new labor contract provides for a wage rise in two stages: an increase of 475 Ron (132

Euros) from the July 1st and another of 175 Ron (48 Euros) from January 1st. Altogether 650

Ron (180 Euros). The workers had demanded a 700 Ron wage rise with immediate effect.

Compared to the wages before the strike the increase amounts to 30-45 percent, depending on the workers' qualifications and the relevant pay-scales. Up till now the wages at the DP

World Container-Terminal were 350 Euros for skilled workers such as metalworkers, turners and electricians, 400-500 Euros for truck drivers and 600-650 Euros for crane operators. With the first wage rise from July 2008 those on the lowest pay scale will now get 500 Euros, those on the highest scale 800 Euros.

The workers at the Dacia-Renault car factory were able to push through a wage rise of 30-50

percent with their strike this spring. Since then they have been earning 300-400 Euros per month. Textile workers and shop assistants earn a monthly wage of about 150-200 Euros, depending on the region.

Romania's legally determined minimum wage was raised from 139 to 150 Euros last week.

(All wage details refer to gross pay).

www.prol-position.net. This article was originally posted as a news article, later edited with an update and converted to a history article.



1. In Romania only few flats are rented out. The rents are very high. People who have been lucky own their home, house prices were low before 1989.



2. A kind of income tax form containing remarks about the employee's performance.



3. According to the Federatia Nationale a Sindicatelor Portuare (FNSP) the port of Constanta employs about 9,000 workers. In total thirty unions are affiliated to the FNSP, representing 6,000 members.